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The Late Byzantine Identity

An Abstract

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In early Byzantine Aphrodisias a Green Gentile Butcher from a certain *Phyle* could find his seat marked in the theatre, reserved for all time on at least four co-ordinates of identity, assuming others, such as gender or language. The mid-Byzantine obsession, on paper, with *taxis* and *taktika* has long been discussed. But the late Byzantine identity, or identities, is more intriguing, for it sometimes concerns people who did not know who they were when given what choice conquest or conversion allows. Few could have the independence of Agnes of France, who as the dowager empress Anne refused to be "liberated" by the Latin Fourth Crusaders in 1203.

No single category is sufficient after 1204. The widest self-designation is 'Christian', that is the spiritual subject of the Patriarch of Constantinople, which increasingly embraced more than the secular subjects of any single Orthodox ruler. Apophatically, the term was hardened during the period under two pressures. A 'Christian' was neither a Latin, nor a Muslim. After 1453 sultan Mehmed II first satisfactorily defined 'Greeks' as hereditary taxpayers 'Rumi', and patriarch Gennadios Scholarios refined them as 'children of God', the true chosen people awaiting the end of the world in A.M. 7000 or 1492 A.D., so time was short. Medieval Christian attitudes towards Jews, who did know who they were, is important as a negative definition of those who wished to be chosen but not Jewish.

What terms were used on a notional late Byzantine passport? Would the Orthodox delegation have had to alter theirs when they left the Council of Florence in 1439? Secular passports would show some delegates only to be subjects of the emperor of the 'Romaioi'. Spiritual passports, such as one presents at the toll-gates of Judgement, would now include the patriarchs of both Romes, while Bessarion could make out any he chose. But what about international or displaced Byzantines? George of Antioch would now only be entitled to some UNESCO museum pass to 'Norman' Palermo, but his mosaic passport portrait there of 1151 would surely have given him free cultural access to the Byzantium which he knew without knowing Constantinople itself, which Agnes-Anne adopted.

Passports can mislead. Mine now describes me as 'British Citizen'. I am neither. Like 'Romaic' the term 'British' is an antiquarian revival (of 1707), but I have sworn fealty as *subject* of my Queen (in Byzantium Latins were just *citizens*). Danes, who do not seem to have any problems of identity either, were until 1972 subjects of their "King of the Goths and Wends" — peoples over whom both Justinian I (527-65) and the Grand Komnenos Alexios III of Trebizond (1349-90) also claimed dominion. I hope this makes my point clear. The alternative is that of Bongoes, despot of Arta, who in 1399 called himself 'Serbalbanitoboulgarovlachos'.

Besides Religion (which is different from Faith) and Ruler, most realistic marks of identity which harden demonstrably in late Byzantium are to do with Family, Culture and Place.

FAMILY: Before the Western distinction between state and estate, dynastic marriages could link Mongol *qiriltays* with Paris through Byzantium. Among rulers, the names 'Kantakouzenos', 'Komnenos' or 'Uros' became titles too. By extension is the notion of '*blastogenos*' or '*phyle*'. Analyses of emergent family names in the charters should be pursued in the PBE: toponymical, craft and nick-names, especially bilingual – any Macedonian *douloupariokos* could be registered as Bogdan, Theodoulos or Abdullah as the circumstance demanded. But Greek, Slav, Turkish, Persian or Georgian family names are important because a Byzantine family chose to adopt one. Marriage is an economic and cultural contract, but the registers of the patriarchate of Constantinople cannot tell us of what happens when Orthodox marry Muslims (or further complications even among Orthodox, Georgian or Serbian).

CULTURE: Late Byzantines identified themselves by dress, *kefiye*, turbans, even saddlery – where it is difficult to know who first adopted which. But language was one mark. As late as 1962 I was told in the Pontic mountains that "This is Rum land; they spoke Christian here." Dietary regulations outlive language. A Serbian version of an Ottoman proverb runs: "*Tarhana* is Muslim food; cabbage and bacon are infidel food."

PLACE (Greek '*patris*', Turkish '*memleket*') is the most significant identity of all. Their place of origin, however small but especially when it is blessed by the blood of a local hero, martyr or family to which it gives its name, would have been the first identity on a Byzantine passport.

To break the rules of Family, Culture and Place, see the Pontos, subject of the patriarch but not emperor of Constantinople; and within the Pontos the Chaldians – not a self-designation but like the Welsh, Vlachs, or Walloons an outsider term. In the fourteenth century these Chaldians had, like their Turkmen neighbours, a dynastic or 'great family' sense. They dressed and rode like Turks. They ate *trachanas* rather than bacon. They did not speak recognisable 'Christian' (though their painters wrote it on walls). Here Muslim bride-price drove out Christian *proika* dowry. But in their intense localism the Chaldians were more Byzantine than the Byzantines: an identity as distinct as today's Gothic and Wendish Danes. In the Pontos true priorities are demonstrated in a letter dated 11 December 1461 from George Amiroutzes (later accused of turning Turk) appealing to his kinsman Cardinal Bessarion (who had turned Latin), without mentioning that they had shared a passport to Florence. Here one Byzantine apostate appeals to another on the surer ground and identity of their common *patris*.*

* *Patrologia Graeca*, ed. J.P. Migne, 161 (Paris 1866), cols. 723-728

At the last International Congress, in Moscow, many participants visited the refurbished Tretyakov Gallery and admired the icons, hung as art upon the walls. I do not know whether any of them shared an experience that I have had several times, in the C.I.S. and in eastern Europe, of standing in a near-deserted gallery and watching someone slip into the room, bend close to an icon, and kiss it. It is a salutary experience, and the point is obvious: even divorced from their sacralizing context, even in a modern museum, the concept of the sacred image as 'art' is too restrictive. Since 843, when the status of images was canonized during the restoration of orthodoxy, religious images have formed an integral part of orthodox Christianity, and of orthodox identity.¹

Mid-way between the restoration of orthodoxy in 843 and today, in 1438, in Ferrara, Sylvester Syropoulos reported the reaction of the Byzantine emperor's confessor, Gregory Melissenos, to images in an Italian church as follows:

When I enter a Latin church, I do not revere any of the saints that are there because I do not recognize any of them. At the most, I may recognize Christ, but I do not revere him either, since I do not know in what terms he is inscribed. So I make the sign of the cross and I revere this sign that I have made myself, and not anything that I see there.²

Melissenos did not distinguish between images of saints and the saints themselves – he did not say 'I do not revere any of the portraits of saints that are there' – though he was clearly referring to painted representations. Melissenos did not find the distinction necessary to make, most obviously because sacred images, in orthodox theology, represented their prototype.³ More important here, however, is his refusal to revere an image of Christ 'since I do not know in what terms he is inscribed' – since, in other words, the image did not follow Byzantine visual formulae. Melissenos distanced himself

¹ See J. Gouillard, 'Le synodikon de l'orthodoxie, édition et commentaire', *Travaux et mémoires* 2 (1967), 1-316; commentary on the doctrine of images at 169-82. The synodikon may post-date 843 but if so it evidently incorporates material composed for the restoration of orthodoxy: *ibid.*, 138-68.

² Trans. C. Mango, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire 312-1453* (Englewood Cliffs, 1972), 254; I have been unable to consult the standard edition: *Vera historia unionis non verae*, ed. R. Creyghton (The Hague, 1660), 109.

³ See, e.g., G. Vikan, 'Ruminations on Edible Icons: Originals and copies in the Art of Byzantium', *Studies in the History of Art* 20 (1989), 47-59; and the 'Introduction' in R. Ousterhout and L. Brubaker, eds, *The Sacred Image East and West*, Illinois Byzantine Studies 4 (Urbana, 1995), 1-24.